DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 248 892 IR 011 369

AUTHOR Riley, Judith
TITLE The Problems of Writing Correspondence Lessons. DERG Papers Number 11.
INSTITUTION Open Univ., Walton, Bletchley (England). Distance Education Research Group.
PUB DATE Aug 84
NOTE 60p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Anxiety; Case Studies; Correspondence Study; Courses; *Distance Education; *Emotional Response; Foreign Countries; *Guides; *Instructional Materials; Interviews; *Material Development; Teamwork; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS Open University (Great Britain)

ABSTRACT

A review of current guides for and advice on preparing distance education materials suggests that such aids are inadequate to help solve the problems faced by course developers because of several underlying assumptions: (1) there is no need for advice on the preparation process--establishing an ideal of the desired product is enough; (2) good planning makes for easy writing and planning should be separated from actually writing the lesson; and (3) the "objectives first" approach is not only best for students' learning but is the best way for teachers to prepare lessons. Although this advice may be necessary, additional guidance may be needed on the practical difficulties of writing correspondence lessons and working in teams, as well as alternative systems of organizing the work. This report uses case studies of the individual course materials drafting process at the British Open University as a basis for suggesting alternative methods for course development that consider the process as one that is complex, individual, and emotional. It is suggested that advice on procedures for preparing distance education materials could utilize a problem-oriented approach that offers alternatives and emphasizes the positive role of individuals. (LMM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED248892

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

DERG Papers
Number 11

THE PROBLEMS OF WRITING CORRESPONDENCE LESSONS

by

Judith Riley

The Open University
Distance Education Research Group

August 1984

IR011369

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Keith Harry

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

The Open University's Distance Education Research Group aims:

1. To pursue research and development work on specific aspects of distance education in an international context

2. To disseminate knowledge concerning distance education practices and systems.

DERG Papers are occasional papers prepared by members of the Research Group and others on aspects of distance education. Submission of a paper for publication by the DERG will be taken to imply that it represents original work not previously published or being considered for publication elsewhere. Contributions should be addressed to Greville Rumble, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, United Kingdom. Copies of papers in print may be obtained from Keith Harry, Documentation Officer, IDC, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, United Kingdom, from whom an up-to-date list of titles in print and prices can be obtained.

Copyright © 1984, The Open University

Distance Education Research Group
The Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes MK7 6AA
United Kingdom

An Invitation

I hope that you find my argument in this monograph interesting and that you will send me your views, or any comments that you may have. I would be particularly pleased to hear from anyone who has tried to give the kind of advice that I am advocating, so that we may exchange experience.

I would also appreciate opportunities to develop my ideas with those who are struggling to prepare distance materials, preferably at workshops where we could look at the differences between our problems and yours and where I could check out how far our experiences can be helpful in your different context.

Dr. J. Riley

Institute of Educational Technology
The Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA
England

Telephone 0908 74066

Telex 825061

THE PROBLEMS OF WRITING CORRESPONDENCE LESSONS

Contents

	Page
The advice does not solve the problems	3
One institution's efforts to improve	15
Some key features of course production	20
-the process is complex	21
-the process is individual	25
-the process is emotional	31
The potential for advice on process	35
-a set of tasks?	35
-a problem-oriented approach	37
-offering alternatives	38
-emphasising the positive role of individuals	45
Conclusions	49
Appendix: List of manuals consulted	54
References	56

The advice does not solve the problems

Advice on how to prepare distance teaching materials, is reflected in a growing number of manuals and self-instructional packages of guidance. Some of them are aimed at a wide audience, of which the best known are probably the International Extension College's Writing for Distance Education (1979) and Janet Jenkins' Editing Distance Teaching Texts (1976). Two that I have helped to prepare are the British Open University's Self-Instructional Teaching Package (1977) and our Making Self-Instructional Material for Adults (1984). The South Australian College of Advanced Education offers a Diploma in Distance Education, with printed study materials and audio cassettes (1983). Many of the simpler manuals are printed within institutions for their own staff, such as Hefferman's Designing an External Subject (no date) for the Western Australian Institute of Technology and the Manual for Correspondence Course Writers, prepared for people writing for the Ethiopian Government's Adult Education Department (Ethiopia, Department of Adult Education, 1979). Several manuals are reports of workshops held for groups of staff embarking on this new kind of teaching for the first time, or of conferences where experiences were exchanged. A list of all the manuals that we hold in our documentation centre is included in an appendix to this paper.

The advice is intended to guide the correspondence author, or occasionally the designer of whole courses of distance education, on how to do this unfamilar kind of teaching. The manuals use such phrases as "to provide the basis for the design of effective external studies teaching materials" (Meacham and Evans, no date), and "to help you

produce a Directed Independent Study course" (Simon Fraser University, no date). The basis for advice is an assumption that their readers are experienced teachers in the conventional classroom or lecture hall, wanting help in extending their skills to teaching at a distance. The International Extension College publication (1979) gives us an idea of the wide range of kinds of materials that such readers may be faced with preparing:

> "...-reading materials for new literates;
> -correspondence courses at the equivalent of primary or secondary level;
> -specialised courses for professional, vocational or skills training;
> -instructional booklets and other materials designed to help people make better uses of the limited resources available to them;
> -materials for university extension studies." (p.3)

Most of the manuals have broadly similar contents, although some are much more detailed than others. They concentrate on describing what they judge to be the characteristics of effective distance teaching materials. They emphasise such matters as the importance of stating clear objectives for the students, the need to break the content into small steps and to include exercises through which the student can practice and check his understanding, and they tend to suggest that a one-to-one "tutorial" style is most appropriate.

In my job as an educational technologist at the British Open University, I have worked with course teams and individual members of staff, preparing our undergraduate courses, which are focussed on correspondence lessons. I have found that even the most experienced staff still have serious problems in preparing distance teaching materials. These are people who are familiar with the kind of recommendations in the manuals, yet they still find writing

correspondence lessons very difficult. For example, draft lessons often arrive late and some decisions are forced by time pressures. There is a lot of tension at some stages of the work, such as when a team comments on a member's draft material. Some individuals find that they have severe problems with particular tasks, such as sequencing the topics within a lesson.

Listen to two experienced Open University academics talking about what they are doing, while actually preparing their draft correspondence lessons. They know what they are trying to produce, but nonetheless, they are finding it difficult to do. The first quotation comes from a Social Scientist working alone at home, on a first draft of a lesson. He recorded his comments onto a cassette for me in January 1979. Between the paragraphs of the transcript, there were breaks in the recording while he got on with his thinking and writing.

> "So, now I'm going to use a device that I often use in this kind of situation, and that's to write down these topics. And then, just in a list form, and then try to reorganise them in a way that I can then, in a way that will flow reasonably.
>
> So, those are the topics, and now I've got to decide how I'm going to order them in a way which makes sense and which makes it fairly easy to write, without having constantly to refer backward and forward.
>
> This is an obvious beginning thing, because its the major point that I want to get over. Its been mentioned at various earlier points in the course. The trouble is that undercuts
>
> What I'm doing is numbering these, I'm up to five now. If that's the next one, that leaves that as the last one. I'm not sure that should be there, at the end. Well, in this kind of situation, I have the choice of either, seeing if there's some alternative way I can do it, with this listing, or, starting to write it and seeing whether it will come right in writing it. I'll just see if I can, how I can reorganise it as it is.
>
> Trouble is, you can't go very far with this, because of the short headings of the topics. I can't always remember what's in all of them, how they're formulated, and therefore how they might follow on. So, beyond a certain point, the only thing to do is start writing and see if it will work out."

The second record was made while I watched a Mathematician at work, on the final draft of what he calls his "unit": his correspondence lesson. This recording, made in January 1979, was punctuated with long silences; these few lines represent about 20 minutes in real time. I have omitted two names in lines 3-4, to preserve anonymity.

> "I am going to get this finished by lunchtime (looks at his watch). Yes, just about.
>
> The example here, where I say 'I' is ...'s and the solution is ...'s.
>
> What am I saying?
>
> No, that's not important (crosses out half a line)
>
> (Starts cutting up a bit of writing)
>
> Agh! That's another bit that will need changing
>
> I think we'll do it this way
>
> You can't say 'There are times when I thought I'd cracked it', in a unit, can you? Its a bit colloquial .
>
> If I asked you to say 'to-ing and fro-ing', how would you spell it? (We discuss this briefly, he writes it in, then crosses out the complete phrase)
>
> Oh, that diagram is a little bit confusing now isn't it? (Showing it to me)
>
> (Lights a cigarette and redraws the diagram)
>
> Oh sod! (His pen has run out)."

The first record shows us someone struggling with sequencing his topics for a correspondence lesson, trying different orders and feeling uncertain whether his final choice of sequence will prove satisfactory. In the second quotation, the Mathematician was trying to write the final words of his lesson out in full. Although he had completed two previous drafts which had been approved by his colleagues, his head was still full of a great diversity of concerns and criteria, and he kept changing his mind and seeing that one decision meant that another piece of the

text had to be changed to fit. Even though these two senior lecturers were experienced authors and were well aware of the characteristics of good distance education materials, their task was not easy.

I have spent short periods of time as a consultant, trying to help the staff of distance education colleges and universities in Iran, Venezuela and Sri Lanka. Like the manuals, I stressed such matters as the importance of considering the needs and capabilities of their students, the role of clearly expressed objectives, and the value in trying to write as a personal tutor. Yet I became aware that many of the academic staff were more deeply troubled by quite other questions.

In Iran one of the underlying difficulties seemed to be the use of a team to design each course, with a mix of Iranian and American members. In Iranian society, university staff are used to a relatively hierarchical style of leadership by the professor, while the Americans expected decisions to be reached by discussion and concensus. In Venezuela many problems seemed to stem from the attempt to design detailed briefs for course writers. The objectives were prepared centrally by educational technologists and the individual subject-specialist authors were asked to fill in the content, without being allowed to change these prior lists of objectives. In Sri Lanka there was always a sense that the lesson writers, who had no particular commitment to the Institute of Distance Education, were being asked to do too much for the fees that could be paid. In all three countries there were external panels of eminent academics who set syllabuses which it seemed impossible for students to cover in the time available.

These kinds of problems, just as much as those of the Open University

lecturers quoted above, are not covered in the usual manuals, workshops, courses, conferences, or consultancy advice on distance teaching. While the advice that is given is usually well received, I believe that it is by no means the whole answer. I think that the supposed "how to do it" advice is based on several misleading assumptions.

The first of these is that if you learn about the characteristics of good distance teaching materials, good in the sense of helpful to the students, you will automatically be able to produce such materials yourself. It is implied that knowing about the novel distance education product, is enough for teachers who are experienced in face-to-face teaching, that the process of preparing that product will look after itself. But it is my experience, that giving people an image of what they should try to produce, of what good correspondence lessons should look like, does not tell them how to produce those desired outcomes. It is as though advice on cooking was confined to describing magnificent meals and justifying those particular selections of dishes, rather than telling one anything about how to prepare such meals; there is nothing about how to prepare the ingredients or how to cook them. Another analogy would be advice on weaving that emphasised the characteristics of different kinds of cloth, but entirely omitted to explain how to set up a loom and to use the shuttle. In advice on distance education, much is said about "techniques", but these are techniques of presenting material to students, not techniques for teachers to use in preparing their correspondence lessons.

Several of the manuals do include advice on two aspects of the preparation process, within their predominantly product-oriented recommendations; these are developmental testing and evaluation. For

example, these are given some attention in the Council for Educational Technology's materials on How to Write a Distance Learning Course, 1980. While some teachers may appreciate this advice, I find it difficult to understand why these two topics are selected for help. Surely it is easier to do developmental testing and evaluation on distance education materials than on classroom teaching? The survey research techniques involved are well documented.

A few of the manuals, designed for internal use in a particular institution, go beyond describing an ideal product to include some administrative aspects. For example, The University of Zambia's Guide to the Teaching of Courses (no date), gives practical details about typing services and university policy on enrolments and assignments. One or two manuals touch on cost considerations (for example, Meacham and Evans, no date). The Allama Iqbal Open University's Course Production Handbook includes sections on scheduling, the roles of different people who can help, such as editors or secretaries, and has just over a page on the conduct of meetings (Fleming, 1980).

None of the manuals that I am familiar with, sets out the pros and cons of working in teams, or of in-house drafting as opposed to employing consultants. There is no guidance on designing a system of allocating the different jobs between individuals. Nor do they give advice on coping with unreasonable external steering committees! The problems that people found to be most pressing when I was in Iran, Venezuela and Sri Lanka, are not mentioned.

Nor is there much attempt to help with the individual author's process of preparing his draft lessons. Some manuals include lists of tasks in

the form of "Prepare product x, then prepare product y, then finally prepare product z", without facing up to the difficulties in such tasks. The Social Scientist struggling to sequence the topics of his lesson for the Open University of the UK, would find criteria for evaluating his final choice of sequence, but no procedures to help him fix on that ideal order. The Mathematician labouring over his final choice of words for his lesson, would not find any aids to coping with the multiple criteria that are overwhelming his judgement.

This gap in their advice is not usually recognised by the authors of the "how-to-do-it" manuals. I have found only one example, in a paper for the Indian Institute of Correspondence Courses. Shamshad Hussain said that "we have to pay attention to the artist who is nobody else but the lesson writer himself" and he drew attention to the fear of criticism that paralyses many writers and to the importance of "team spirit" as an aid to effective discussion and planning of courses. (Sinha, 1982, pp.53-59.) Unfortunately, he did not go on to tell us how he would recommend that the artist should be supported through his paralysing fears, or how team spirit should be developed.

The assumption that the process of preparing correspondence lessons should be relatively simple, is linked to another assumption: that once the planning of distance lessons is well done, the actual writing of the words is easy. It seems to be thought that meeting a brief is straightforward and that most academic staff should not find writing any more difficult than lecturing. The model seems to be that of studying one's students and thinking about one's subject matter and then designing the teaching material in the form of an outline, which you can subsequently fill in without much difficulty, remembering to adopt a

"tutorial style". In many distance education institutions, such as the Universidad Abierta of Venezuela, this separation is taken further, by using different people to prepare the briefs for the lessons, from those who write the detailed words for the students to read.

Yet there is some evidence that this separation of roles causes problems: authors find it very difficult to cover all the objectives listed in advance and resent the implication that their own view of their subject has to be put aside. Nunan has recently published a book on his belief that school teachers must not let other professional educational designers plan their curricula, materials and evaluative mechanisms. He stated firmly that,

> "Design in these areas, is an expression of the meanings and purposes of the teaching and learning situation, and without this crucial element the teacher becomes a 'presenter' or 'implementer' acting out the purposes and meanings embodied in someone else's design." (Nunan, 1983, p.82.)

When the roles are not formally separated, many experienced authors find that they change their plans as they write. As the Open University Social Scientist quoted above said, "...beyond a certain point, the only thing to do is to start writing and see if it will work out." In writing, ideas are clarified and better ways of ordering the topics can be seen, or new perspectives develop, so that the relative importance of the objectives shifts. This creative role of the struggle to express oneself, is recognised by some Psychologists who specialise in studying writing. For example, Wason encourages what he calls a stage of "uncritical exteriorisation of thought about a topic" in writing, as a means of generating new ideas (Green and Wason, 1982). If major new insights come during drafting, then the planning of distance education materials should not be separated from the writing stage, and putting

the teaching into words cannot be seen as a subsidiary process.

All of the manuals that I have studied, assume agreement on the traditional "objectives first" model, based on the ideas of Tyler (1949) and subsequently developed by Taba (1962) in the U.S.A. and Wheeler (1967) in the U.K. I believe that this may in itself be unhelpful, although the objectives model does have the virtues of simplicity and an emphasis on the student's needs. The model has been severely criticised and is widely held to be inappropriate for much higher education at least (the arguments were summarised by MacDonald Ross, 1973). In addition alternative models have been suggested, for example, Stenhouse, 1970, recommended an approach based on defining acceptable principles for teaching different school subjects and stating the criteria by which the pupils' learning would be assessed. Many Open University distance education courses now dispense with prior objectives for students and instead focus on the thematic questions that are to be discussed in the lesson.

However, my point is that whether or not a list of objectives is the best way of helping students to start learning a new area, I think it may be misleading to suggest that that is the best way for a teacher to begin designing a correspondence lesson or course. For example, most Open University course teams begin with several months of discussion on alternative themes and content areas, getting an idea of the potential argument and structure of what they want to write, before they focus on precise objectives for students to achieve from studying this area. Their courses are judged to be successful, so are they necessarily wrong to ignore objectives in their early work?

Rowntree, 1981, suggested that one could choose from a wide variety of techniques, in starting to define the content of any course. He began (p.35) by suggesting what he called "intuitive approaches":

> "-Sitting and reviewing one's own knowledge of the subject.
> -Asking other teachers and subject-matter experts.
> -Analysing similar courses elsewhere.
> -Reading textbooks aimed at students working at about the same level as ours will be.
> -Reading more advanced books and scholarly articles on the subject.
> -Reviewing films, radio and television tapes, newspaper and popular journal articles, etc., relating to the proposed subject.
> -Asking prospective students what topics they would like to see the course include.
> -Discussing with students their existing conceptions of, and attitudes to, the key concepts of the subject-matter.
> -Choosing books (or other source materials) around which the course will be organised.
> -Thinking of essential activities that students need to engage in as part of the course.
> -Considering how student attainment on the course might most sensibly be assessed.
> -Studying an examination syllabus, the question papers, and examiners' reports from previous years, and so on."

He also suggested using more formal and systematic techniques drawn from competence analysis and concept analysis, as well as suggesting drafting objectives.

To summarise: I am critical of three assumptions that seem to underlie most advice on preparing distance education materials. The first of these is that there is no need for advice on the process of preparation, that establishing an ideal image of the desired product is enough. The second assumption is that good planning makes for easy writing and that the planning should be separated from finding the actual words for the lesson. The third assumption is that the "objectives first" approach, is not only best for the students' learning but is the best way for the teacher to prepare his lessons.

While I am critical of these implications of the concentration of advice on the image of the ideal product, I believe that it may be right to

start by giving guidance in this way. Many lecturers may need to know **what** they are trying to produce, before they can look at **how** to do it. There may be a time factor too: many staff may be more receptive to guidance on how to do this job, after they have found it to be difficult!

The rest of this paper argues for what could be a second stage of advice: advice that gets to grips with the practical difficulties of writing correspondence lessons and working in teams, and that sets out alternative systems of organising the work. I shall describe some research that I have recently completed, which led me to see how advice could be extended in this way, to help with the process of preparing distance education materials.

One institution's efforts to improve

Until recently, the British Open University concentrated its institutional research and development efforts onto the characteristics of good teaching systems, with little attention being paid to the process of producing those materials. In having this emphasis, it was similar to the various sources of advice on distance education that have been reviewed above. Since 1976, there have been several attempts to penetrate the academic production process itself; attempts to discover what is done and to recommend improvements to this process.

In 1976, after seven years of course design, the OU had not achieved the full range of course materials that we felt our university should offer. There was pressure to appoint more and more staff, and increasing worries about the rates at which we were producing new courses. The University's Production Methods Committee seemed unable to solve this problem and many of its meetings were unconstructive. Academic staff complained of administrative delays and unhelpful support staff (editors, designers, printers, etc). The non-academic staff for their part, were sure that most of the trouble was caused by lecturers who would not treat deadlines seriously.

Mason, 1976, presented some images of how it seemed to the academic staff at that time, which included three metaphors that expressed their feelings about the difficulties of co-ordinating the very large programmes of work involved in producing each course:

> "The image of a ship aground, surrounded by salvage tugs, trying to free it ... the chairman acts like the captain of the stranded ship (the as yet immobile course) ... the tugs must pull in such a way as to complement each other ...
>
> "The image of an apple orchard ... As the trees grow, they need careful and constant pruning ... But how does it feel to be the

apple tree? It sends out shoots and while, some remain, others get clipped.

"The image of a sheepdog trial ... the chairman, who has a problem akin to that of the dog. The authors (like skitterish sheep) will all too easily bolt in an unexpected direction, handing in written material after the deadline bearing little resemblance to the previous draft. The operations area and the committee structure act on the dog somewhat like a shepherd ... However they have little direct control over what happens." (pp.27-28)

Then the overall Planning Board asked me to help organise reviews of the methods of course production in each of our six Faculties. We formed academic groups to question members of a selection of course teams. The reports of these groups concentrated their criticisms on Faculties' organisation of manpower, on the definition of roles and on communications between all those involved (Methods Review Groups, 1977). In some cases, what were seen as problems of slow production, were ascribed to trying to prepare over-ambitious interdisciplinary or innovative courses. The reports were not well received and little change appeared to result from their recommendations.

A second attempt to penetrate the preparation process was made by the University's Institute of Educational Technology, which invited consultants from the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations to study a course team. Their report emphasised the psychological stresses of this work and characterised many team members as suffering from depression in their roles (Lawrence and Young, 1979). They discussed their findings in terms of unconscious processes, such as fantasies of rejection, of enemies and of unendingness. The language and concepts used were unfamilar to our staff and this research had a mixed reception. Its main contribution was probably in making it more possible to accept publicly that course production was difficult. The educational technologist most closely associated with the Lawrence and Young

research, has since been welcomed as a consultant on conflicts and stress, to course teams and to individual team members.

There have been more obvious practical changes as a result of a series of "university workshops", organised by the Production Methods Committee. Most of these have taken the form of a series of speakers from the Faculties, describing innovations that they have developed. Many of the speakers have shared information on innovations in materials, such as a workshop on the use of video-cassettes. But some have concentrated on new ways of producing materials: for example, I organised a workshop on the use of consultants (summarised in Riley, 1982). A recent workshop on low resource courses, included sessions on using very small course teams, on buying in existing materials and on new methods of preparing manuscripts for printing. Workshops for individual course teams, on writing processes and on commenting, have been focussed on the team's current concerns, illustrated by reference to shared experiences.

Since 1983, sudden reductions in our overall budget from the Government, have forced renewed interest in different and possibly cheaper systems of producing courses. Much of the initial effort has been focussed on improving information on the detailed costs of each production decision. Such information is extremely hard to determine. For example, a decision to have one more essay test in a course can be costed as the number of extra fees that will have to be paid to staff to mark the essay for all the students on the course. But that ignores the difficulty of predicting the number of essays that will actually be submitted, and the costs of postage if the usual pre-paid envelopes are provided. Then there are overheads in terms of course team members'

time to monitor the marks given by the part-time tutors, extra computer time recording the results, the costs of notifying students of their results, and many others. And all that ignores the costs to the students themselves.

A rather different kind of work has been directed at the separate members of course teams. It was recognised that the time that the team members spend alone, drafting their lessons, was extremely time-consuming, often the majority of their time for about six months, just to produce about twelve hours of students' work. Rather than making recommendations for improving practice from outside the course teams, this approach involved accepting that it was necessary first to understand how that time was spent. In 1977 there was a brief study of the process of revising drafts in each Faculty (Institute of Educational Technology, 1977). This found that a considerable variety of procedures had been developed. More recently I have studied the individual drafting process in much more detail and in a course team context. This research used mainly qualitative methods but in all nearly fifty staff were studied.

I began with open-ended interviews with staff in a single discipline about their drafting process. My second approach was to make a case study of a course team and all its members throughout its two year course preparation period. This observation included tape-recording meetings, informal interviews with individual staff members and observing individuals while they were drafting. The third component of the research was a survey of opinions on the main influences on course team decisions, among a sample of 24 staff, drawn equally from all the OU's Faculties.

Some of the results of this research are reported in the rest of this paper, in so far as they illuminate the difficulties of the course preparation process and indicate the kinds of procedures that OU authors adopt. A fuller account of the findings is available elsewhere (Riley, 1984a, b and c), as is a more detailed account of the research methods (Riley, 1983). My research findings have been shared with only a few colleagues from outside the OU as I write, but their reactions are encouraging. It appears that these phenomena may not be unique to the British Open University; people with experience of distance teaching at other institutions recognise our problems. In the rest of this paper, I shall use this case study to elaborate the potential for advice on how to prepare distance education materials.

Some key features of course production

The British Open University experience of several attempts to understand and improve our process of preparing correspondence lessons, shows that while it can be difficult and unrewarding, the process is by no means impenetrable. It seems that course preparation has three key features. Firstly, it is a complex process: each team seems to take a different approach, giving varying degrees of emphasis to each of its tasks and to the different stages of the work; there cannot be a simple single process description. As the process is rarely discussed, there are few agreed terms in which to describe it and each team develops a private language for key issues. Secondly, it seems that individuals proceed independently and in private for much of the time but they welcome knowledge of how their academic colleagues tackle their work. There is a demand for the sharing of experience of both difficulties and innovations. Thirdly, the studies show that the process is emotionally fraught and the feelings that staff have about their work, are an integral part of the process, not some separate source of failure. While such feelings can be spoken of with a trusted colleague, they are not normally discussed publicly even within a friendly course team.

Each of these three key features of course production will now be discussed in turn, with examples drawn mainly from my own research on the British Open University. Individual informants have been protected by substituting letters of the alphabet for their names and by using masculine pronouns throughout. I have added some comments in brackets on non-verbal behaviour, to some of the illustrative quotations and indicated lengthy pauses in speech by three asterisks. Three dots has the usual meaning of omitted data. Where I have had to invent a new term for a concept, I have put this into heavy type.

The process is complex

One of the most striking characteristics of the individual's largely private process of preparing correspondence lessons, is its complexity. In the example of the Mathematician, drafting at home, quoted above on page 7, one can see many different concerns in his mind. He was:

-checking the use of pronouns (lines 2-3)

-struggling to understand his own intended meaning (line 4)

-assessing the relative importance of items (line 5)

-considering future redrafting (line7)

-considering style (lines 9-10)

-considering spelling (lines 10-11)

-trying to be clear (lines 13)

On other occasions, other authors told me of other criteria, such as the need to avoid:

-too many cross references (an Educationalist)

-being boring (a Geographer and a Statistician)

-being pedantic (a Mathematician)

-developing too many new terms (an Educationalist)

-repetition (an Educationalist)

From the manuals on the characteristics to aim for in one's lessons, one could doubtless add many more possible concerns to these, such as the often stressed need not to overload students and to provide opportunities for "active learning".

A common way in which experienced writers of distance lessons cope with this complexity, is to adopt a strategy which I call **spiralling**. By this I mean that on their first attempt at a draft, they will only allow a few concerns to intrude on their search for a way of tackling their lesson. At each subsequent draft, they are able to take a few

more ideas on board, until the final version has been checked against their full range of criteria.

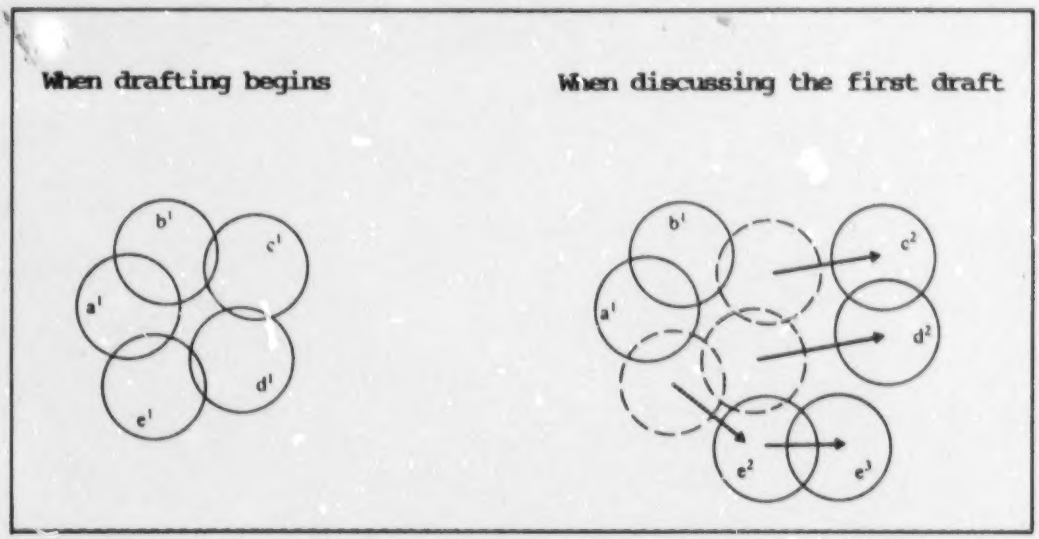
Most systems of preparing distance education lessons include an element of what I call **commenting** and this adds another kind of complexity to the story. **Commenting** may take the form of developmental testing by students, who try out the materials in as near the final conditions as possible, but often this is not feasible. Much more common is for some academic colleagues or assessors to read the drafts and then give their reactions to the author or his editor. If a course team is being used, then each member may be expected to read the work of all the others. So an author may receive several sets of uncoordinated comments.

However, I was suprised to find that many of the changes that the author made between one draft and another, could not be traced to any comment made by his colleagues. This can be understood by reference to what I have called the **out-of-step phenomenon**, which adds to the complexity of receiving numerous differing reactions. When an individual goes off to work on the first draft of a lesson, he and his course team usually share several ideas about what he is to try to produce. However, as the author works on his draft, his ideas develop and he sees other ways of dealing with his topic, and other objectives that students might be asked to achieve. When he brings his first draft back to the course team, they are bound to be out-of-step with his new thinking. Some of them may have changed their views of the role his lesson should play in the course, as a result of working on their own lessons, and some of them will have been so busy with their own work that they have not given his lesson another thought since the unit outline was first discussed. As a result of this divergence of opinion, the author and his commenters

inevitably compare his draft with different images of what the lesson should be. I have called this divergence the **out-of-step phenomenon.**

In fig.1 below, each circle represents a different image of the same lesson. The overlapping circles in the left hand cluster represent the team's images of a single lesson before drafting begins. The more open diagram on the right represents their images of the same lesson at the time of discussing the first draft.

Fig.1: The divergence of images of drafts



For simplicity a five man team has been represented, in reality there would usually be more members with a correspondingly greater number of separate and diverging images of each lesson. The team members have been called a,b,c,d and e, the author of the lesson in question. Their images of his lesson are given the suffix 1 when drafting begins and the suffix 2 when the draft is discussed.

The draft that e produces, labelled (e2), represents the author's thinking when he had to hand his work over to be typed. By the time of

the meeting to discuss his draft however, e's thinking will have moved on, so that the lesson he now intends to prepare has changed, and this is represented by (e3). Meanwhile, team members a and b have been so busy with their own work, that they have not considered e's lesson at all. Consequently, at the discussion meeting, they are comparing (e2) with their original images: (a1) and (b1). On the other hand, c and d have found that their work on their own lessons has caused them to reconsider e's part of the course. At the meeting, c and d compare (e2) with their revised views of the role of e's lesson, which I have designated (c2) and (d2). In the discussion (e2) is therefore being compared to a different reference image by each member of the team: i.e. to (e3), (a1), (b1), (c2) and (d2)!

This divergence of images will increase with every draft, for many team members cannot pay sufficient attention to each other's lessons even to catch up with the author's views at the time he wrote each draft; and they are getting more involved with the preparation of their own material, as time goes on, and so are increasingly reluctant to think about the course as a whole.

As the author carries on exploring the topic of his lesson and developing his expertise, the reasons for his drafting decisions become increasingly sophisticated and embedded into their subject matter context, even though the structure and argument of the lesson may be becoming clearer with each successive draft. One way of looking at this divergence is to see the lesson as a living thing, continuously growing and changing in its author's mind. At intervals he prepares a static account of this living entity, a "snapshot in time", in the form of a written draft, which he circulates for comment.

Three forms of complexity have now been described stemming from: the multiple criteria in the author's head when drafting; from the multiple sets of differing comments on his draft that he may receive; and from the divergence of images of comparison - the out-of-step phenomenon.

The process is individual

A second key feature of the process of preparing distance teaching materials, is that each individual author seems to adopt different procedures, even if his aims for his lessons are rather similar. Here are two Geographers, both having previously prepared successful published correspondence lessons, talking about how they begin the task of finding and selecting their sources and sequencing their materials. I shall call them A and B. The quotations are taken from transcripts of informal interviews made in 1977.

A and B each see the problems of planning their lessons quite differently the other and they tackle the job in quite different ways. A has the inital strategy of **covering the field:**

> A "I've always collected too much material. I read and I * * *
>
> That's what slows me down a lot of the time. I collect and I read and I write off for things and I write off to other people and I get myself soaked in the area. So soaked very often that I can't get up out of it until the third draft. You know, until I can finally sort of, see above the top of this muddle, and think well obviously that, that bit's irrelevant, we'll cut that whole section out. I do get very submerged in it. I always have too much, to write about...
>
> ... with this one I just latched onto 'development', and I looked I went into the library and I looked up 'development' * * *
>
> I'm totally depressed today. M sent me this book and he also sent me a review of the literature of ... that he has just done, and there's pages and pages of the stuff and if only I'd known ..."

A tries to find and read everything that could possibly be relevant on

the subject of the unit he is to write. This strategy has enabled him to draft several units to an acceptable standard but it does pose problems, which are illustrated in the quotation above. I characterise the main problem as **knowing when to stop**; A talks of being "in a muddle" and "submerged" by too much material. While he told me that he paid some attention to the deadline provided by the team's schedule, this alone was not enough to enable him to stop gathering new material. He had asked B for advice:

> A "... he said, 'You stop when you say I'm not going any further.' And then I found three more, after I'd spoken to him and I was reading them, and I said, 'Oh, B, what am I going to do?' And he said, 'Well, do they add anything?' And I said, 'No, they say much the same as I've said.' 'So,' he said, 'Put them down and do something else.' And he's right, but I, I get last minute nerves, I, and you've only got to read one, and then the footnotes, and the references, and follow those through, and pick up another one, and you find there's a lot more stuff."

I have called B's strategy **supporting an argument**, as he believes that the search for sources should not attempt to cover every document on a subject, but rather be limited to covering those aspects that he needs for his idea of his lesson.

> B "What I'm certainly bad at is the sort of, the proper academic game of getting in nine hundred and ninety nine different, pieces, of work, or sources or whatever, and I do tend to prefer somewhat not to read things in a way so that I can leave them out with a clear conscience (laugh). I just get to the stage where I can't raise any interest (laugh) in reading any more. I'm very happy if I've got very little subject matter. In most cases I find that although I may dig out the most recent literature, it doesn't seem to make much difference to the way the thing fits together in my head."

When they come to sequencing the material, A and B again tackle the job differently: A tends to be driven by the material which he has collected, using a **sources first** strategy, while B prefers **argument first**, even when he cannot do this easily from existing knowledge of the lesson's subject.

A "I can start doing my research, with an, with some ideas of structure in mind, but usually I don't. Usually I just plunge in, to the area, and when I've read a little bit I start thinking well these seem to be the things that are cropping up, I'll latch onto this kind of structure."

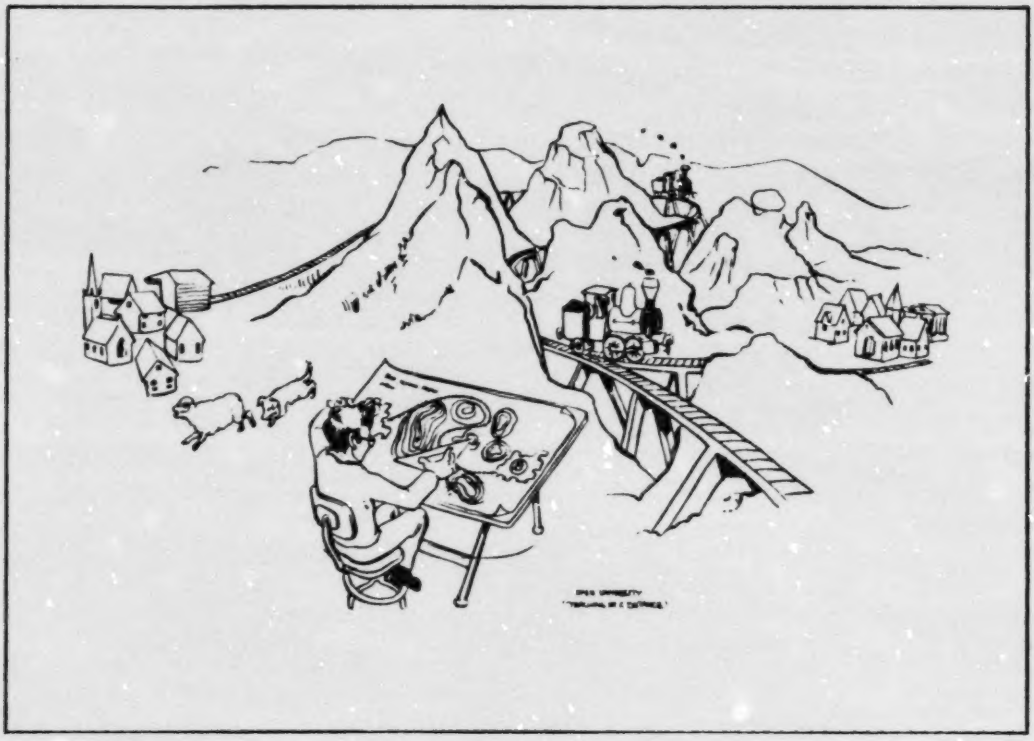
B "My next step tends to be to try and get clear in my own head, the kind of story that's involved, the narrative of the unit. Because I have got the feeling, both from my own experience and from looking at other people's stuff, that if you read first, often you end up with a welter, and its (laugh) much more difficult at that stage to be able to pick your way through. Quite often there would tend to be a piece of paper with a thing written here and one there and arrows pointing around. That comes out basically from thinking. And after that I tend to think, well, there are certain things that have got to get read before I go on with this."

These two authors, whom I have called A and B, seem to have radically different approaches to beginning work on their lessons. Neither uses the "objectives first" approach that is usually recommended, and yet both produce correspondence lessons that are seen as successful.

Fig.2: The author as packing a box

In an earlier article (Riley, 1979), I suggested that these differences in approach could be characterised by two contrasting images: "packing a box" for A and "designing a railway track" for B. The first image, in fig.2 above, is of someone kneeling on the floor, trying to pack a lot of awkwardly shaped objects into a trunk. The author is concerned to squeeze everything in, without any bits sticking out when the lid is shut. His problem is to include all the material that he has found exists, in a way that does the subject justice, but within a limited amount of student study time.

Fig.3: The author as designer of a railway line



In the second image, shown in fig.3 above, B is likened to the director of a track-laying team for a rail company. This author plans out his route before he starts, to take the students, or trains, from one point to another, through difficult mountains. When the author is out in the

field, the route never quite works out as he expected. Whenever he returns to his track-laying activities after a break away from the site, he has to run out from his starting point again; as a writer he has to re-read his argument to see how it is building up, before he can go on to complete his lesson.

In contrast to the major differences in strategy described above, at a much later stage in the process, when drafts are being discussed in a public meeting, all the authors seem to have the same image of what they are trying to do: to cope with **anxiety**. At this stage, they show their individual approaches by using a wide variety of different tactics. For example, I observed what I call **nobbling** on several occasions. This involves approaching people who will be at the meeting where one's draft is due to be discussed, in advance of that meeting, in order to enlist their support. Some authors find it easier to convince their colleagues on a one-to-one basis and individual approaches may provide more time to explain their point of view. They may also offer reasons why they would be reluctant to make changes, that they would prefer not to say in public, such as family events that make further work on the draft very difficult. By this tactic, the author goes to the meeting knowing that at least some of the team understand his feelings. This approach is commonly combined with the tactic of **playing for sympathy**, either before or during the meeting. An author using this tactic stresses the effort that has gone into the existing draft, preferably in a context of a heavy load of other work and personal pressures.

An author whom I shall call D, used to employ another tactic, which I call **answers in advance**, to ease his fears of public criticism:

> D "I tend to, tried to, (laugh) think of all the answers to all questions prior to that. I think I'm rather on the defensive."

He explained that he found it easier to take "personal abuse" now that he had been at the university for some years, but to start off with it had been "a very difficult thing". Other academics, such as L strongly disapprove of this kind of defensive tactic:

> L :But the one thing I refuse point blank to do, unless the comment is particularly stupid, or there's something gone badly wrong in the communication of the unit, I won't challenge what people say. I think that to sit there defending and causing rancour is an appalling state of affairs. If it hasn't communicated, no matter what the reasons, then you've got to do something about it."

Authors can use their greater knowledge of the draft under discussion to confound their critics, by quoting passages which appear to meet their criticisms. F used this tactic, which I call **insider knowledge** to counter comments that he did not wish to accept:

> F "I was aware that I know the unit better than anybody else. I could quote chapter and verse and therefore I had power, and I had power to steer things in directions that I wanted. If someone said that they didn't feel that such and such was sufficiently emphasised I could certainly find an example of where I'd covered it. And I suppose I could fiddle it by the degree of emphasis that may not have been there - I'm not sure I did that but I'm saying I could have done and people. I think there were obviously comments which I, um, replied to and defended successfully."

This kind of unique knowledge of his own lesson enabled F to find examples of points quickly and so confound his critics.

The last of these tactics that have been observed for defusing authors' anxiety over public criticsm, I have called **asking for more**. Rather than being defensive, this uses attack on the commenter, turning on him and asking him to be more specific or to suggest how his criticism could possibly be accomodated. G used this tactic to confound a commenter J in a meeting that I recorded in 1978:

> J "I felt that the point which I know was trying to be made there, and wasn't actually coming across, and that would have been one where I would have tried to rewrite that as a suggestion, I think."
> G (quietly) "How would you?"
> J (interrupting) "Yes!" (laughing and looking guilty)
> G "You haven't?"
> J (interrupting) "I hadn't actually."

J was quick to see that G was going to ask him how he could rewrite the point in question to make it "come across" better, and knowing that he could not see how to do this himself, he immediately felt guilty and embarrassed - and this criticism was not referred to again.

It is not clear from my research to what extent these variations between individuals in their choices of major strategies, or in their selection of techniques to use in a particular difficult situation, are inherent or can be changed. Presumably one could argue that while some elements in their choices were a matter of rather fundamental character differences, some others arose from their previous experiences of writing, or were influenced by the traditions of their academic discipline, while yet others might be rather random selections from the few techniques that they could imagine to be feasible.

The process is emotional

All too often the existing "how to do it" advice implies that there is nothing to fear in launching into this new kind of teaching. Yet from the immediately previous section, you can see that at the British Open University at least, many experienced staff have a serious problem with anxiety when planning their lessons and again when they come to present their drafts to their colleagues. And these are not the only emotional occasions, the following examples are drawn from a much larger set of expressions of strong feelings:

> H "It wasn't an easy thing for me to write. I was quite relieved to get it finished. Although it was very inadequate, at least it was done."
>
> G "I don't think I effectively put pen to paper until Thursday evening, by which time I can tell you I felt nearly desperate. I didn't let it show."
>
> A "I imagine C and I work very similarly. From the agonies he's poured out to me on the 'phone about his latest unit."

K "Am I uniquely hydra-headed and manic depressive?"

The Geographer whom I am calling A, reported that he very much wanted comments on his first draft of a particular correspondence lesson and pursued individuals for their reactions. The chairman of another part of this course shared A's office and read his draft but he felt unable to go further than saying that it seemed "fine" to him, as it was not his subject area. Later A managed to have a talk with the chairman of A's own part of the course and A conveyed that he felt "near to tears" in his isolation.

In the wider survey that formed part of this research, a Scientist explained that fears commonly led to writing blocks:

> "Personally, I'm the most susceptible to this that I know. It leads me to procrastinate, to displacement activities. Its OK once I'm doing it, I can write very fast when I'm happy about what I'm doing and very slowly when I'm not. It may actually influence what's finally in the unit, the quality for students must be affected by my reluctance and lack of confidence etc. The problems come home to my family when I can't write and when I'm writing I'm happy but not available to them!"

These expressions of feelings described variously as reluctance, desperation, agonies, depression and being near to tears, suggest a deep personal involvement with drafting. The process is not simply technical, not a mechanical matter of following through a series of staged tasks according to set rules, in order to do a good job for the students. Much more appears to be at stake; the process is personally threatening.

It seems that experienced and successful distance teachers may not always be best advised to concentrate single-mindedly on students' needs, as the guidance manuals would have us believe and as I've encouraged people to think in the past. Authors have needs too and in

teaching by correspondence, they may be peculiarly exposed: at the Open University the correspondence texts are all published and on open sale in bookshops. In many disciplines, colleagues in other universities are known to refer to our texts; it is as though one were lecturing to an audience of one's academic peers, as well as to hundreds of students.

From observing the course preparation process, I became convinced that some of the work was being strongly influenced by a factor which I characterised as **individuals' personal desire to enhance their own status in the eyes of colleagues inside or outside the OU.** In the cross-faculty survey that formed part of this research, staff were asked to rate the overall significance of this factor to course team decisions that they had experienced. A few of the sample were adamant that this factor had no effect, for example, an Educational Sociologist pointed out that:

> "The range of people one might wish to impress is so great and what enhances status with one group necessarily diminishes it with others."

He saw the pay-off of his work in terms of the effects on students and subject development and considered that his recent course work had been counter to personal progress at the OU. A few others made the point that rather than being concerned to enhance their status, many team members were more concerned to avoid looking foolish or disgracing themselves.

Others in the sample admitted that this factor had been important in their experience. As one informant put it, "The desire to innovate is part of the 'role image' of many academics." Others elaborated on how this factor operated:

> "Its a great factor in Maths., everyone has an eye over their

shoulder at the world outside the OU, especially through TV." (A Mathematician)

"I was very aware of colleagues at other universities and colleges who might take it up, therefore I was extra careful about getting it right, thinking of bookshops, not internal status." (A Technologist)

"Some staff who are on temporary contracts must be out to prove themselves, but its hard to disentangle this from their commitment to the course." (An Arts faculty member)

"Personally, if I'm honest, a large part of the excitement, the stimulus of getting high level stuff across, is getting praise for the right reasons. It can have a negative effect, some people become cagey of departing too much from an established position, in ... being a good teacher is making fewest mistakes and not living dangerously." (A Scientist)

In addition to the need to avoid looking foolish and the desire to innovate successfully and so enhance their reputations, there was another reason for seeing the focus of the draft lessons as other than the students. It seems that many experienced authors find it most helpful to prepare their first draft as though they were talking to themselves, as a way of sorting out their ideas. Then when they come to rewrite this for submission to the course team, most will have their immediate critics in mind as their audience: whoever is going to read this draft and have to be satisfied with it, which is often academic colleagues. They will be anticipating their comments as they write this second draft. It is only after colleagues are satisfied that many authors are able to really focus on the student as the reader of their work. This **audience shift** seems to me to combine elements of the strategy that I have previously called **spiralling**, with some recognition that the students are not the sole audience of many lessons. There is a procedural choice as well as an underlying current of strong personal feelings.

The potential for advice on process.

It is clear that the lack of accounts of the process of preparing distance education materials, is not caused by any reluctance among those involved to describe and explain their experiences. And despite the difficulties caused by the unfamiliarity of such discussion, there are discernible patterns in the process. Most of the problems that were identified, were recognised by all my informants, and the varied procedures that they used to develop their materials could be given names that everyone was able to understand.

If one were to try to give advice on procedures for preparing distance education materials, what form could this take?

A set list of tasks?

Several attempts have been made to produce lists of essential tasks for OU course teams and their individual members, for example, Lewis, 1971 and Pentz, 1974. My own summary list of the tasks that I found were commonly done, as opposed to any list that I might think ought to be done, was as follows:

Initial planning: getting the idea;
forming the team;
preparing proposals;
getting approval.

Drafting: finding sources;
selecting material;
sequencing material;
writing the words.

Commenting: preparing comments;
presenting comments;
receiving comments.

Rewriting the draft, several times, doing some or all of the drafting tasks again.

This list does not represent a chronological order in which the tasks are done; for example, some authors will be preparing comments on a

colleague's draft at the same time as, or before, selecting material for their own lesson.

It is a very different list from what one might predict from the heavily recommended "objectives first" model. Notably there is no clear stage of defining objectives, either for the team as a whole or for individual authors and the "proposals" that are prepared are formal applications for approval by university committees, rather than briefs which the team can use for the next stage of their work. Planning and drafting are intermingled. Nor can one see the preparation of particular aspects of the teaching materials as separate tasks: drafting assessment material or preparing student exercises, are not distinguishable from other aspects of the work. Consequently, if such a list of "real" tasks was used to structure advice on process, it would not parallel existing product-oriented manuals at all closely. But it is not clear that helpful advice on process would be organised around a list of the tasks to be done.

For it is my experience that the actual tasks done are very variable, between institutions, between teams and between authors. It is not just a matter of whether the work is done by teams or not; there are also differences depending on the precise system of roles in use. For example, it depends on whether one author prepares all the drafts and does all his own editing and diagrams, or whether these tasks are shared out between different members of staff. Even any one author on a single team, may do different tasks for the different lessons that he has to produce.

One reason for this variablity even between two lessons being prepared

by the same person, is time pressure. Rather than being highly specified, the job of preparing a unit appears to allow for a considerable variety of interpretations: the tasks are capable of being expanded or contracted. Also some tasks are seen as less important than others, so while it is essential to complete the work on one's own correspondence text, if at all possible, a team member who is short of time may acceptably refuse to comment on others' work, and if really under pressure may even neglect the non-text tasks associated with his own lesson, such as preparing a teaching cassette or even assessment questions. I have called this idea the **elasticity of tasks**. Tasks are treated more or less seriously according to various circumstances: if the author knows his material well, for instance, his search for sources will be limited. If the author has a lot of other work to do at the same time as drafting his lessons, he may treat the choice of words to express his ideas less seriously than the man with plenty of time for polishing. If his lesson is to appear towards the end of the course, standard formats may be so well established by discussion of earlier lessons, that his effort on determining headings or placing student exercises, will be much less than that of an author of an earlier lesson.

As a consequence of the elasticity of tasks, process advice organised around any list of apparently essential tasks, would be less helpful than it might appear at first sight.

A problem-oriented approach

I suspect that advice which focussed on the many common problems that correspondence authors seem to meet, would be more useful. From the Open University research, such a contents list would have to include

such problems as:

-getting started on finding and selecting sources

-knowing when to stop collecting more sources

-finding the right sequence for topics

-getting started on writing the words of a draft

-keeping going when you get stuck

-dealing with multiple criteria

-getting too close to one's own work.

If they had to comment on their colleagues' work, then they commonly met other less serious problems, such as:

-deciding what they wanted to say

-deciding how to express their comments

-needing to soften their criticism.

And when receiving comments, they had problems with:

-benefiting from the meeting while under tension

-anxiety in general

-organising disparate comments into useable form

-deciding what changes to make.

Offering alternatives

Such advice would be more helpful, if it could go beyond merely making people aware that they could expect to meet certain problems, to setting out for them some of the alternative ways that experienced staff have tried to meet those problems. I would doubt that anyone could recommend the best solutions, regardless of circumstances but it would I think be useful to know of a range of different approaches.

I have already described alternative approaches to beginning work on a draft, on pages 25-29, and a variety of tactics that can be used to

alleviate the anxiety of having one's work discussed in public, on pages 29-31. Let me illustrate this further with examples of what I mean in relation to other common problems: the alternative ways that people tackle the problems of **getting too close to one's own work** and of **needing to soften criticism.**

When writing alone, a common problem is the feeling that one is **getting too close to one's own work,** that you "can't see the wood for the trees" and have lost your ability to judge the quality of what you are producing. A told me that:

> "I get myself soaked in the area. So soaked very often that I can't get up out of it until the third draft. You know, until I can finally sort of, see above the top of this muddle ... I read it through Wednesday afternoon and I was really trying to sort out what in fact I had written, what I said in the unit.."

I found a variety of tactics were used by open University authors, to gain a better perspective on their draft. For example, A was using the technique of **reading the whole thing through.** Many authors found that getting their draft typed was helpful. Members of the course team that I studied in detail sometimes drew out the arguments of their drafts in diagrammatic form. I often read a draft out loud to be able to "hear it" in a fresh way. I have called these techniques **switching mode.** Many authors appreciate **getting comments** from others as a means of distancing themselves from what they have recently written. Finally, there was a general assumption that **allowing time to pass,** did in itself, help with the problem of getting too close to your own work.

As a second example of alternative techniques, there are the variety of ways in which those commenting choose to present their reactions. Their main concern seems to be **needing to soften criticism,** which might

otherwise be taken as destructive, in order for the author of the draft under discussion to be able to benefit from the commenter's remarks. Some commenters prefer to see the author on a one-to-one basis, privately, but many feel that comments should be made in front of the whole team and are very aware of how worrying this can be for authors. Most of our commenters are also responsible for drafting some lessons.

One experienced commenter said that he thought one should say what one liked first, as well as drawing attention to the changes one would like to see made. Six other different tactics for helping an author to see one's comments as constructive were observed. Often the key lay in small turn of phrase.

Minimising one's power involves an attempt to make the author feel that he is in charge and that the commenter is in a relatively weak position. So, for example:

> F "I definitely carefully structure my sentences around phrases like, 'you might like to consider' and 'I rather got the impression that'."

Another commenter was heard to begin his remarks with the following:

> Q "I stand in a very awkward position because frankly I've had no time to read this properly or to comment on it in detail, but I'm wondering whether, one couldn't..."

Having put himself in the wrong, Q then went on to make some penetrating criticisms of the draft lesson. **Expressing worries** uses a similar approach:

> X "That worries me a little bit actually. I'm a bit bothered about that, I mean..."

Jokes are commonly used, usually against the commenter himself. H claimed that he often used this tactic:

H "Its very embarrassing if you find a lot that you think is wrong with a unit. I mean you don't want the person to feel that you've just sat down and absolutely slated them, because that would be very hard for them to take. So you have to try and think of ways of making, I usually make a joke of it. Making light of it."

H is being kind, to ease the initial tension and minimise his own apparent power, not only for the benefit of the author of the draft that is being criticised but also to reduce his own feelings of embarrassment.

Another way of softening criticism that is often used, is to provide comments on relatively straight-forward matters in writing, but to save difficult fundamental criticisms for face-to-face discussion with the draft's author. This tactic, which I have called **avoiding documentation**, allows the commenter to soften his hardest reactions with suitable self-deprecating phrases and jokes, and allows him to develop his criticisms gradually, in discussion with the author. This tactic is often combined with **avoiding detail**: the commenter only states his difficulty with the draft briefly at first. Only if the author fails to understand him, or begins to defend his original treatment, will the commenter go on to elaborate and explain his criticism.

The final alternative that has been identified, is **being helpful**. This usually takes the form of offering explanations of the reasons for the commenter's difficulty with the draft and, preferably, also suggesting remedies that the author could adopt. Here is one team member approving another's commenting technique:

J "...it was done very much on the basis of 'I think if you moved this out and put it in there, and we shove this example in instead, don't you think it makes a better argument? Let's just make it come across.'"

It is not usual for these kinds of alternative strategies or tactics to be discussed at the Open University and I have not seen them mentioned

in publications or at other Distance Education gatherings, yet when I mention them, correspondence writers usually recognise several of them. I believe that a greater consciousness of the choices available might be helpful, for presumably some techniques are more appropriate than others in different circumstances or for different individuals.

In addition to these choices for the individual lecturer trying to ease the development of his own correspondence lessons, there are alternative systems which could be selected for a whole course process. For example, a team could decide to allocate the work in different ways. Some teams prefer individual authors to take responsibility for a few lessons each, from brief to completion, through all the necessary drafts and including tasks like adding illustrations, checking copyright permission, and designing associated examination questions. I call this the **individually drafted lessons** system. Other teams prefer to split these roles in the **assembly line** approach and may have specialist team members to concentrate on editing, graphic design or copyrights, or they may ask particular lecturers to accept the responsibilty for preparing all the cassette tapes or the whole examination paper. A few teams at the Open University have tried **team drafting**, with groups of consecutive lessons being prepared by small groups of staff taking a joint responsibility. In a few other teams, lessons were passed from one author to another after the first draft, in what I call the **passing the ball** system.

As another example of these kinds of team choices, the study of the revision of drafts mentioned above on page 18 (Institute of Educational Technology, 1977), found that there were several different ways of organising the commenting process. These were characterised in their

report as: "traditional course team discussion, modified course team discussion, written comments and tutorial commenting".

In "traditional course team discussion", the draft unit is circulated to team members and then at a team meeting, they comment on it to the author who then goes away to redraft the unit. In "modified course team discussion", only a sub-group of the team is delegated to read a particular draft, perhaps three people for each unit. This sub-group may prepare a written summary of their views for the rest of the team and they then meet with the author. In another variant, the team discussion may be based around a written paper summarising the results of developmental trials of the draft materials with students. The term "written comments" was reserved for the system in which the draft is circulated to the team and any other assessors, and then written comments are sent to the author by some of the members. In some of the three systems described so far, a major role is given to the Open University's part-time staff, who will be providing a limited amount of face-to-face teaching once the course is in use. They are briefed to comment from their experience of likely student reactions and difficulties; tutors meet the author or send him written comments. By "tutorial commenting", this study meant a system whereby an educational technologist prepared an analysis of the structure of the draft, which was then discussed with the author and amended until both author and educational technologist were satisfied.

Similarly, the team can choose its own schedule to some extent. Some choose what I call a **serial** system, so that early parts of the course may be completed before the last few lessons have been seen by the team in any extensive form. Others prefer to use a **parallel development** system: to

group the lessons into blocks, or to see all the first drafts together and then all the second drafts together.

At the institutional level, it may be possible to choose between different models for the whole process. For example, it has already been mentioned (page 17), that the Open University is being forced to consider cheaper models. In a recent paper (Henry, 1983), it was suggested that our particular students and institutional circumstances might now force us to prepare more courses by the "transformer model" or as "wraparound courses". These models are of course, more common internationally, than is the Open University's own heavily centralised system.

The "transformer model" is already used extensively at the British Open University, for the preparation of our Continuing Education courses. Here consultants are employed temporarily, either on piece work or on short term contracts, to provide material in their area of expertise. Full-time staff, experts in the principles of distance education, then transform this into suitable learning materials. More recently some Continuing Education consultants have been asked just to provide a list of the key points that ought to be covered in a course on subject x and references to the "best" texts on the area. Here internal transformers become authors as well, but are directed to appropriate subject material by experts and so do not have to conduct their own literature reviews.

"Wraparound courses" offer more potential for savings, with the course based on an existing resource, such as a text book. Some material is then specially written to "wraparound" this existing resource, either as a guide to using the book, with self-assessment exercises and

assessment material, or adding some additional material for topics that need up-dating, or are not covered by the existing book. Some courses have been prepared around a student "project": a major exercise in independent work, with the extra materials providing a guide to this method of study and research, as well as introductory material on the subject area.

Emphasising the positive role of individuals.

As so many distance education courses are prepared in teams, advice should stress the importance of team atmosphere and the significance of individuals. Working in groups is not easy and it might help to be able to anticipate some of the common tensions and outright conflict situations. Many examples of individual stress have already been given, for example on pages 31-32. As a further example, recent work by Robert Nicodemus has emphasised the difficulties of the early planning stages in OU teams, when individuals feel uncertainty about the likelihood of success of their venture, unsure whether it will be worth their while to co-operate and unsure of how reliable the others in the team will prove to be. Techniques to defuse these situations and to speed up the process of becoming a supportive group are now being developed in the OU's Institute of Educational Technology.

Recognition that these feelings are common and do not indicate personal failure, may be helpful. It might also be helpful to stress the crucial importance of the individual creative role, that producing distance teaching materials cannot and should not be a simple technical task. I asked a question about this in my survey: "How different would a team's decisions be if in the same context a different set of individuals had formed the team?" Almost without exception, my

informants were quite sure that individuals mattered.

A Philosopher spoke of content variations:

> "No, it wouldn't be at all the same, in my area. The more innovatory the course, the more it is dependent on individuals...The big difference between ... and ..., reflect most of all the differences between individuals, their perceptions of the problems and the aims. Another example, ... and ..., two virtually interchangeable Philosophers, writing on ... had such different styles that they hardly seemed to be writing on the same man. Maybe this is generally true in Arts, where writing units is such a personal thing. OU staffing policy, the whole idea of replacing people on secondments, is dotty because of this, you can't replace them, it just means that you can do something different."

A lecturer from the Faculty of Educational Studies stressed the interactions between members of a team:

> "No, they wouldn't produce the same course, whatever the subject matter the approach etc. would be very different. You can see it with consultants who are not yet socialised into the OU, or with new members of the course team. And above that you still get a lot of variation, because it grows out of interactions between people and between people and subject matter, it's an organic thing."

A Mathematician saw the major cause of differences as variations between individuals' abilities and experience as teachers.

> "It's partly a matter of the varying ability in teaching at a distance that individuals have, which is not simply equal to their length of time at the OU, that leads to different emphases. Partly because people have had different experiences and without very large experience, they don't have the wider view necessary to pick out the most important points - and that's the sole criterion of whether a course is any good or not."

And finally, a Physicist emphasised the role of chance:

> "It would be different, because the course team is so open, even with some five page outlines, a course continues to redefine itself even when printed. Even if one took those outlines as a constraining brief, it could still be radically different, because of the course team differing and because of accidents, disasters and luck."

These four informants, from a wide range of departments, emphasised the role of the individual in course preparation. In some areas each member

of staff has his own slant on his subject, in others the variation is more in their teaching abilities. And every new group of people has its own unique history and set of interactions among its members.

One could see the behaviour of course teams as influenced by two kinds of factors: **public factors** and **private factors.** In the public category come considerations that can be termed getting it right for the benefit of the students, or to do justice to knowledge itself. These are the criteria that are stressed by the existing manuals on distance teaching and which tend to be used in public commenting on draft materials. In the private category are the more personal concerns of making the task not too onerous and of protecting and developing the author's image with his colleagues. These private concerns are essentially considerations of the self doing the drafting but are just as apparent in people's behaviour as the recommended public criteria.

Both public and private factors represent the intentions or motives of the team members, that lie behind their observable behaviours, and yet are less deeply buried from view than would be any more psycho-analytic interpretations. Hamilton (1980) makes a similar distinction: he distinguishes the covert intentions of his informants, from the overt surface behaviour that the covert intentions give rise to, and from the unconscious drives that may lie behind those intentions. The question of why people behave as they do when preparing courses, could be answered at any of these three levels. For example, consider the individuals who choose to start drafting by establishing the line of argument for their lesson. I could suggest that this is because they dislike library searches, an interpretation at the first level, in terms of task behaviours. Or I could claim that they chose this strategy

because they needed to be dominant and controlling. In this case my explanation is in terms of unconscious drives and at the third level. By suggesting explanations for differences of behaviour in terms of the difficulties and rewards of university life, my interpretation is being made at the middle level of analysis.

Whether these personal concerns should influence the preparation of teaching materials or not, it is clear that they do so. Consequently I would argue for their inclusion in any advice on this preparation process. My own opinion is that the process of preparing distance teaching materials is so bound up with the feelings and individuality of the staff concerned, that their personal concerns are a crucial positive force for overcoming the many problems involved and creating the numerous innovations that are needed for success.

Conclusions

In this paper I have tried to illustrate my reasons for believing that the current focus of advice to distance educators is too limited. While it is an obvious first question, "What have I got to prepare?", and one needs some images of ideal materials, an exclusive emphasis on products is unfortunate. It is unfortunate because it does not help with the inevitable second question of "How do I do it?" or with the many problems that are bound to occur in trying to produce materials with these ideal characteristics. These difficulties are not confined to those distance educators with little experience of their new task. My research has shown that even experienced staff at the British Open University, find course production dificult and suffer much stress while drafting their own lessons.

There are interesting parallels with the failure of advice on related topics. For example, advice on classroom teaching tends to describe the characteristics of idealised lessons, rather than telling novice teachers how to acheive such results in the face of an overloaded timetable, too few reference books, or ill-disciplined children. The London School of Journalism offers courses in writing, which are built around the characteristics of acceptable articles, rather than advising on how to find that elusive story thread and direct style, when faced with a blank sheet of paper and a pressing deadline. Similarly, books for students on how to write essays or theses, stress the importance of such matters as the clarity of the argument and of the conclusions being firmly based in the data; they do not tell the student how to cope with his panic or depression when unable to make his argument clear or unable to remember how he came to his conclusions.

Yet it seems to me that help could be given to distance educators. At the simplest level one could advise that problems are to be expected, and so you are not a failure for experiencing difficulty. However, advice on process could go further, to describe the many alternative ways in which experienced and successful course team members have tackled these common problems. While it is not yet possible to say that this technique or that procedure will be more successful than this other way of doing things, we can at least offer a choice for staff to use. In some cases we may be able to point out the implications of using a particular technique in certain situations, and so help someone to decide whether it is appropriate for him, his subject and the particular lessons that he has to prepare. Even experienced staff at the OU have welcomed knowledge about new ways of doing things, to compare with their habitual procedures.

Research on the relative effectiveness of different procedures may never be particularly convincing. Just as alternative classroom teaching methods, seem very dependent for their value on precisely how they are implemented and on particular students' approaches and motivations for studying, so the choice of procedures for preparing correspondence lessons may best be left to the judgement of individual teachers. They will have to weight up the personal characteristics of staff and their particular circumstances of subject matter, students, and institution.

All this assumes that it is possible for staff to change their ways of preparing courses. This assumption has hardly been tested yet in the field of distance education and certainly there is evidence that staff development and innovation in teaching methods in conventional face-to-face teaching is not easy. Yet to teach at all by distance methods,

involves a major change of approach and it is our experience at the OU, that in this new situation, staff have been more ready to learn and to change than might otherwise have been expected. Once habits of preparing distance materials are established, it may not be easy to change them. However, we find that OU course teams do continue to innovate and many individual members of staff appear to welcome a sharing between teams of techniques of course preparation. This can be at the simplest level. For example, I told a lecturer who was having difficulty in avoiding distractions and displacement activities while writing, that I often drafted in bed, she tried it and reported that it worked for her too!

One of the most interesting findings from my research has been that staff are willing to discuss these matters of procedures. I had wondered whether the lack of public discussion and of overt choice of techniques, meant that there was some kind of taboo in this area. On the contrary, I found a great willingness to talk, even an eagerness to share the stresses and fears, once people realised what I wanted to hear about. I had to establish that I was not really interested in what was "supposed to happen", that is the official story recorded in such publications as The Open University of the United Kingdom (Open University, 1977), which I had helped to prepare. I knew we told the world that the process was a series of steps of producing objectives, self-assessment questions, cassettes etc. and involved studying the characteristics of our students and the time and resources they had for study and that we did extensive trials of draft materials. I also knew that it was not really like that at all, that that kind of "explanation" was a neat over-simplification and that the real process was much more complex, individually varied and emotional.

There were two main problems in breaking through this "official story". The first was the lack of suitable language for what my informants were eager to convey to me. Throughout this paper I have had to invent new terms for concepts, such as **keeping going, spiralling** and the **out-of-step phenomenon.** There is not even agreed terminology for "briefs" or "outlines" or "drafts", or for what a "consultant" may be expected to do or the role of the "course team chairman". The second potential area of difficulty, was that some of the motivations behind the observed or reported behaviours were of a rather private nature: what I have called the **private factors.**

This leads me to my final point: the nature of the basis for the kind of advice on process that I have been advocating. I think that I have made it clear that I do not find recommendations to produce items a, b and c that are required for the student, in the order in which they will be presented to the student, very useful or soundly based. I would prefer to see recommendations based on what experienced and successful distance educators actually do. The alternative would be to build a new set of recommendations from relevant theory, not theories of how students learn but rather theories about how teaching decisions are best made, how creativity can be encouraged, how writing can be faciltitated and how people can be helped to work together in groups. Preliminary investigations of some of the theory in these fields, such as decision theory, cognitive psychologists on writing and transactional analysis, suggest that these two approaches, coming from successful practice or from relevant theory, would not be in conflict.

Basing procedural recommendations on the practices of successful teachers, avoids having to tease out the criteria of "good practice". I

have indicated that for me, a good process is not only one that results in good teaching materials. I am also concerned with other products; for every course produced has effects on the staff and the institution concerned. The staff have changed: learned new knowledge and skills, and gained or lost in status. The institution has paid out its resources and gained a new course, which will affect its reputation and perhaps its future income. I am also concerned that the experience of producing a course should be good in itself, while it is happening - efficient and stimulating and not too stressful.

Appendix: List of manuals consulted

Allama Iqbal Open University, Institute of Education (1981) Report on National Workshop on Production of Instructional Materials for Distance Learning Programmes (Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan)

Anand, S.P. (1978) Report of the Proceedings of the Workshop on "Instructional Material" September 20-22, 1978 (Directorate of Correspondence Courses, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India)

Council for Educational Technology (1980) How to Write a Distance Learning Course, 11 units, (Council for Educational Technology, London)

Dewal, O.S. (no date) Suggestive Guidelines to Lesson Writers, Occasional Monograph no.1, Towards Open Education Reporter (Open School, New Delhi, India)

Ethiopia, Department of Adult Education (1979) Manual for Correspondence Course Writers (Distance Education Divison, Department of Adult Education, Ministry of Education, Addis Ababa)

Field, S. (1981) An In-Service Handbook for Distance Educators (College of External Studies, Konedobu, Papua New Guinea)

Fleming, A. (ed.) (1980) Course Production Handbook (Allama Iqbal University, Islamabad, Pakistan)

Hefferman, T.M. (no date) Designing an External Subject (Department of External Studies, Western Australia Institute of Technology)

Holmberg, B. (1982) Distance Education: a short handbook, second revised edition (LiberHermods, Malmo, Sweden)

Hong Kong, Caritas Adult Educational Centre (1979) Notes for Authors, presented to an international seminar on distance education, jointly organised by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and the German Foundation for International Development, 13th-15th September, 1979, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

International Extension College (1979) Writing for Distance Education, two vols. (International Extension College, Cambridge)

Jenkins, J. (1976) Editing Distance Teaching Texts (International Extension College, Cambridge)

Jenkins, J. (1981) Materials for Learning (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London)

Levy, D.W. (1982) Course Writer's Manual (The Open Learning Institute, British Columbia, Canada)

Meacham, D. (1982) Distance Education: Selecting Textbooks and Writing Study Guides (Division of External Studies, Riverina College of Advanced Education, Wagga Wagga, Australia)

Meacham, D. and Evans, D. (no date) Distance Education: the Design of Study Materials (Division of External Studies, Riverina College of

Advanced Education, Wagga Wagga, Australia)

Murdoch University, External Studies Unit (1980) External Studies Guidelines for Course Co-ordinators, fourth edition (Murdoch University, Murdoch, Australia)

Open School (1980) Writing for Distance Teaching (Open School, New Delhi, India)

Open University (1977) Self-Instructional Teaching Package (The Open University, Milton Keynes)

Open University (1984) Making Self-Instructional Material for Adults (The Open University, Milton Keynes)

Paine, N. (1983) How to Write Self-Assessment Questions (The Scottish Council for Educational Technology, Open Learning Project, Glasgow)

Part Time Studies Centre (no date) Designing a Part Time Program (Macquarie University, North Ryde, New South Wales, Australia)

Simon Fraser University (no date) Course Authors' Handbook (Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada)

Sinha, B.K. (ed.) (1982) Lesson Writing for Correspondence Students (Institute of Correspondence Courses, Patna University, India)

Smith, K. (1982) Teaching Externally (Department of External Studies, University of New England, Armidale, Australia)

South Australian College of Advanced Education (1983) Graduate Diploma in Distance Education (South Australian College of Advanced Education, Adelaide, Australia)

Technician Education Council (1983) Open learning Guidance Pack (Technician Education Council, London)

University of Zambia, Department of Correspondence Studies (no date) A Guide to the Teaching of Correspondence Courses (University of Zambia, Lusaka)

References

N.B. References for manuals on distance teaching are given in the appendix above.

Green, D.W. and Wason, P.C. (1982) Notes on the Psychology of writing, Human Relations, vol.35, no.1, pp.47-56.

Hamilton, D, (1980) Some contrasting assumptions about case study research and survey analysis, pp.78-92 in Simons, H. (ed.) Towards a Science of the Singular (Centre for Applied Research in Education, University of East Anglia, Norwich)

Henry, J. (1983) Low Cost Courses (unpublished confidential paper)

Institute of Educational Technology (1977) Project on the Revision of Drafts, internal confidential publication (IET, The Open University, Milton Keynes)

Lawrence, W.G. and Young, I. (1979) The Open University, Tavistock Institute of Human Relations document no.2T-271 (Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, London)

Lewis, B.N. (1971) Course production at the Open University II: activities and activity networks, British Journal of Educational Technology vol.2, no.2pp.111-123.

MacDonald-Ross, M. (1973) Behavioural objectives: a critical review, Instructional Science, vol.2, pp.1-52.

Mason, J. (1976) Life inside the course team, Teaching at a Distance, no.5, pp.27-33

Methods Review Groups, (1977) Reports to the Six Faculties, internal confidential publications (IET, The Open University, Milton Keynes)

Nunan, T. (1983) Countering Educational Design (Croom Helm, Beckenham)

Open University, (1977) The Open University of the United Kingdom (Open University Press, Milton Keynes)

Pentz, M.J. (1974) Some Notes on Course Production in the Science Faculty of the Open University (unpublished paper)

Riley, J. (1979) I wonder what its like to write a unit? Teaching at a Distance, no.14, pp.1-8

Riley, J. (1982) Using Consultants, Open Campus, vol.3, no.1, pp.19-26.

Riley, (1983) The Preparation of Teaching in Higher Education unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of Sussex)

Riley, J. (1984a) The problems of drafting distance education materials, British Journal of Educational Technology, vol.15, no.3, pp.32-44

Riley, J. (1984b) The problems of revising drafts of distance education

materials, British Journal of Educational Technology, vol.15, no.3, pp.45-66

Riley, J. (1984c) An explanation of drafting behaviours in the production of distance education materials, British Journal of Educational Technology, vol.15, no.3, pp.66-78

Rowntree, D. (1981) Developing Courses for Students (McGraw Hill, London)

Stenhouse, L. (1970) Some limitations on the use of objectives in curriculum research and planning, Paedagogica Europaea, vol.6, pp.73-83

Taba, H.(1962) Curriculum Development (Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., New York, USA)

Tyler, R.W. (1949)Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, USA)

Wheeler, D.K. (1967) Curriculum Process (University of London Press, London)